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Indonesia: Releases welcome but reform must go further

Amnesty International today welcomed the recent announcement by the Indonesian Government of further prisoner amnesty, but urged the release program be widened as part of a broader human rights reform in Indonesia.

"Prisoner releases will help build confidence in the process of reform", the organization said. "This is one way in which the Government of President Habibie can redress the wrongs of the past and begin building a society respectful of the right of freedom of expression and of association".

"But this latest amnesty, however welcome, should not obscure the plight of the many other political prisoners that remain in gaol - nor the fact that the repressive legislation and unfair judicial process used to gaol them has yet to be reformed".

Amnesty International reiterated its call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience and a comprehensive and widespread review of the convictions against all other political prisoners.

Background

The 50 people covered in the amnesty - not all of whom were in detention - include student activists accused of publicly criticising the President, a member of parliament, and the secretary of the author of a banned book. Two other men who benefited from the amnesty were independent journalists, jailed for their peaceful activities, who were released conditionally in 1997 but remained under official surveillance.

Four others covered in the amnesty are associated with the People's Democratic Party (PRD) and its affiliated organizations. The four men - two imprisoned in Surabaya and two in Jakarta - had received prison sentences ranging from three and a half to five years. While it is not entirely clear on what basis the four were selected, their release sends a positive signal that eight other imprisoned members of the PRD and its affiliated organizations, might also benefit from prisoner releases.

The majority of the released prisoners are from a group of over 31 men and women and at least three deserters from the Indonesian Armed Forces, who were arrested and tried in 1997 after the authorities claimed to have uncovered a messianic movement in East Java revering Indonesia's first President Sukarno. The group's leader remains in prison.

Several categories of prisoners have not benefitted from the amnesty or releases. Thirteen elderly men jailed for their alleged involvement with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) remain in prison, including two men recently hospitalised because of serious medical problems. No prisoners from the provinces of Aceh and Irian Jaya, or any East Timorese were covered in the Presidential Decree.

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